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Curious cuisine

- Simon West
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Why Italians Love To Talk About Food: A Journey Through Italy's Great Regional Cuisines, From The Alps To Sicily
By Elena Kostioukovitch
Picador, 449pp, \$34.99.
IT seems that our appetite for the myth of Italian cuisine is insatiable. Yet one doesn't have to be a gourmet to sense that many of the publications on this topic in recent decades have as much to do with the culture of food in Italy as the Italian restaurants lining Lygon Street in the Melbourne suburb of Carlton.

This book is something quite different. There are no glossy photos and no recipes. Elena Kostioukovitch is Russian, but she has lived in Italy for the past 20 years, and studied its various foods and culinary traditions passionately. The result is a lively discussion of the way what we eat is not just cooked but culturally transformed.

As Umberto Eco describes in his foreword, our attraction to food is not just a means to satisfy our bellies or stimulate our tastebuds, it is also a desire to experience a kind of culture. So that to delve into the rich variety of traditions surrounding Italian cuisine is to discover "the monumental differences, not only of language but of taste, mentality, creativity, sense of humour, attitude towards suffering and death, loquacity or taciturnity, that separate a Sicilian from a Piedmontese or a Venetian from a Sardinian".

Originally written for a Russian audience, the book has enjoyed considerable success in Italy. A Russian telling Italians about their own food is hard to imagine.

In part the success is due to Kostioukovitch's considerable breadth of knowledge, for as she points out there is no such thing as Italian cuisine beyond the clichés of pasta, olive oil and the espresso.

Rather, Italy's 20 regions each have distinct ingredients, specialties, festivals and culinary traditions. Italians from the Veneto region may have a good knowledge of their own local specialties and traditions relating to eating, and a good sense of local ingredients and what time of the year they may be fresh. But they are less likely to have a similar knowledge of what goes on in Sicily or Piedmont.

What Italians do share is what Kostioukovitch calls the culinary code, a unifying element of national identity, more so than any other common values and ideals. This is particularly significant in a country that has been unified politically only since 1861, and where up until the 1950s the language of the home was the local dialect, not Italian.

Yet even the culinary passion is a union based on a wealth of diversity, as the variety of pasta types reveals, all of which, of course, should be matched with particular sauces. Take the following selection, whose names come from the realm of zoology: farfalle (butterflies), conchiglie (shells), lumache (snails), creste di gallo (cock's comb), code di rondine (swallowtails), occhi di bove (ox eyes), occhi di elefanti (elephants eyes), occhi di lupo rigati (ribbed wolf eyes), occhi di passero (sparrow eyes), girini (tadpoles), vermicelli (worms), linguine (little tongues), and orecchiette (little ears).

If Italians love to talk about food, they have a rich vocabulary with which to do so. Allappare, for example, describes the furry sensation left in one's mouth by eating an unripe persimmon.

The book is also the history of how stories attach to food. We learn about futurist F. T. Marinetti firing a revolver into a plate of spaghetti carbonara and demanding that Italians abandon the consumption of pasta, an idea that was encouraged under fascism.

Pasta is made exclusively with durum wheat, which is not produced in sufficient quantities in Italy, therefore it must be imported from foreign countries, including those with which Mussolini cut off diplomatic relations in his quest for self-sufficiency. Hence a fascist publicity campaign was launched, albeit with limited success, to convince people that pasta was un-Italian and bad for one's health.

This book is not encyclopedic. One shouldn't turn to it for a comprehensive guide of a particular region's food. Its modus operandi is that of the anecdote, like a series of rambling conversations around a dinner table.

The chapter on Liguria, for example, is given over almost exclusively to a discussion of the importance of salt and the humble focaccia.

The secret of this latter is local olive oil. When the tradition of preparing focaccia as a provision for seamen's voyages was developing in the ovens of Genoa in the Middle Ages, local olive oil was one of the most abundant ingredients and cost considerably less than imported flour.

Hence focaccias were made thin and flat, with little hollows so that oil poured on top would collect in the depressions.

But now the relative costs and abundance of flour and Ligurian olive oil have changed places to such an extent that it is impossible for all but the wealthiest Italians to buy Ligurian olive oil unless they happen to be friends with a producer. Most so-called Italian olive oil is refined and bottled in Italy, the olives having arrived from Spain or North Africa.

Culinary nostalgia, a feeling that our food is no longer as fresh, tasty, or authentic as it once was, is not limited to Italy.

But the threats of globalisation are keenly felt in a country that so prizes its vast culture surrounding food.

It is a fragile culture because, as this book so admirably demonstrates, it rests somewhere outside of recipes, in the conversations around a table and in a passion for the very ingredients eaten and drunk.

There are moves towards preserving this wealth, such as Slow Food, founded in 1989 by Carlo Petrini, whose advocacy of biodiversity has spread rapidly around the world.

But food, as with everything, is influenced by economic issues, and so these days many Italians are likely to drink imported beer rather than the wines of their region or meet friends in a pizzeria rather than a local trattoria.

Thankfully, *Why Italians Love to Talk about Food* is able to remind them of what they are missing out on.

Simon West is a poet and lecturer in Italian studies at Monash University.

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